

ADDRESS
of
HIS ALL-HOLINESS ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW

“DISCERNING GOD’S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD”

At the Convocation and Honorary Degree
In Honor of His All Holiness
Fordham University Church
New York, New York

October 27, 2009

Your Eminences and Graces,
Distinguished Guests, Beloved children and people of God,

Introduction: The Ecumenical Imperative

It is with sincere gratitude that we accept this invaluable honor of being received into the doctoral college of this esteemed Jesuit school. We welcome this privilege as a recognition of the sacred ministry of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an Apostolic institution with a history spanning seventeen centuries, throughout retaining its See in Constantinople.

Yet, our Church is no worldly institution; it wields no political authority. Instead, it leads by example, coordinating Pan-Orthodox Christian unity by virtue of a primacy of love and honor — a ministry emanating from its supra-national authority. This universal consciousness gave rise to the first seven ecumenical councils, articulated the “Symbol of faith” (or Nicene Creed) and established the New Testament Canon; it also gave birth to Churches from the Caspian to the Baltic, and from the Balkans to Central Europe; today, its jurisdiction extends to the Far East, Western Europe, Australia and America.

Of course, this ecumenicity constitutes both an ancient privilege and a lasting responsibility, demanding an open ministry within our own communions, among other Christian confessions, as well as toward the world’s faith

communities. Within our ecumenical initiatives, the international theological dialogue with our “sister Church” of Rome — instituted in the 1960s as the “dialogue of love” and continuing today as the “dialogue of truth” — comprises our foremost encounter of “speaking the truth in love.” A concrete example of this encounter here at Fordham is the Orthodox Christian Studies Program, which is the first of its kind at a major university in the United States. This program complements the existing annual “Orthodoxy in America Lecture” and the Orthodox Christian Fellowship, and demonstrates a practical synergistic spirit, modeling for Orthodox and Roman Catholics everywhere a shared common purpose based in truth and in love.

Nevertheless, our purpose this evening is not to outline for you the manner in which the ecumenical imperative defines our Church but, rather, to inspire in all of you the primacy of ecumenicity or the value of opening up in a world that expects us “always to be prepared to give an answer to everyone that asks us to give the reason for the hope within us” (1 Peter 3.15). In this regard, we would like to draw your attention to three dimensions of “opening up” or “ecumenical consciousness.”

- (i) Opening up to the heart,
- (ii) Opening up to the other, and
- (iii) Opening up to creation

(i) Opening up to the Heart: The Way of the Spirit

As faith communities and as religious leaders, it is our obligation constantly to pursue and persistently to proclaim alternative ways to order human affairs, ways that reject violence and reach for peace. Human conflict may well be inevitable in our world; but war certainly is not. If the twenty-first century will be remembered at all, it may be for those who dedicated themselves to the cause of tolerance and understanding.

Yet the pursuit of peace calls for a reversal of what has become normal and normative in our world. It requires conversion (*metanoia*) and the willingness to become individuals and communities of transformation. The Orthodox Christian spiritual classics emphasize the heart as the place where God, humanity, and world may coincide in harmony. Indeed, *The Philokalia* underlines the paradox that peace is gained through witness (*martyria*), perceived not as passivity or indifference to human suffering but as relinquishing selfish desires and acquiring

greater generosity. The way of the heart stands in opposition to everything that violates peace. When one awakens to the way within, peace flows as an expression of gratitude for God's love for the world. Unless our actions are founded on love, rather than on fear, they will never overcome fanaticism or fundamentalism.

In this sense, the way of the heart is a radical response, threatening policies of violence and politics of power. This is why peacemakers threatened the status quo. Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount shaped the pacifist teaching of Leo Tolstoy, whose work *The Kingdom of God is Within You* was molded by the writings of the *Philokalia* and in turn profoundly influenced both the nonviolent principles of Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948) and the civil rights activism of Martin Luther King (1929 - 1968). Sometimes, the most provocative message is "loving our enemy and doing good to those who hate us" (Luke 6.27). Some may announce "the end of faith" or "the end of history," blaming religion for violent aberrations in human behavior. Yet, never was the peaceful "protest" of religion more necessary than now; never was the powerful "resistance" of religion more critical than today. Ours is the beginning, not the end of either faith or history.

(ii) Opening up to the Other: The Way of Dialogue

This is why the interreligious gatherings initiated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate are crucial for paving the way toward peaceful coexistence between the world's peoples. Such dialogue draws people of diverse religious beliefs and cultural traditions out of their isolation, instituting a process of mutual respect and meaningful communication. When we seek this kind of encounter, we discover ways of coexisting despite our differences. After all, historical conflicts between Christians and Muslims are normally rooted in politics and not in religion. The tragic story of the crusades is a telling example, bequeathing a legacy of cultural alienation and ethnic resentment.

Speaking, then, of an inevitable and inexorable "clash of civilizations" is incorrect and inappropriate, especially when such a theory posits religion as the principal battleground on which such conflict is doomed to occur. National leaders may provoke isolation and aggression between Christians and Muslims; or else demagogues may mobilize religions in order to reinforce national fanaticism and hostility. However, this is not to be confused with the true nature and purpose of religion. Christians and Muslims lived alongside each other

during the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires, usually supported by their political and religious authorities. In Andalusia, Spain, believers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam coexisted peacefully for centuries. Such historical models reveal possibilities for our own pluralistic and globalized world.

Moreover, any theory about “the clash of civilizations” is invariably naive inasmuch as it oversimplifies differences between peoples, cultures and religions. How ironic that religion promotes a more “liberal” position than the “realism” of a political scientist! The visit in November 2006 of Pope Benedict XVI to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul was historical not only for relations between the Eastern and Western Churches, but also for Christianity and Islam. The then newly-elected Pope continued a tradition established by his predecessors, the late Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, who both visited the Phanar in 1967 and in 1979, respectively.

We affectionately recall how Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (1886-1972), an extraordinary leader of profound vision and ecumenical sensitivity, a tall man with piercing eyes, would resolve conflict by inviting the embattled parties to meet, saying to them: “Come, let us look one another in the eyes.” This means that we must listen more carefully, “look one another” more deeply “in the eyes.” As St. Nilus of Ancyra wrote: “You are a world within the world; look inside yourself and there you will see God in the whole of creation.” Each of us comprises a living icon of the divine Creator. And we are, furthermore, always — whether we know it or not — closer to one another in more ways than we are distant from one another; closer than we might ever suspect or even imagine.

(iii) Opening up to Creation: The Way of the Earth

Speaking of icons when it comes to God and creation leads us to our final point. For nowhere is the sense of openness more apparent than in the beauty of Orthodox iconography and the wonder of God’s creation. In affirming sacred images, the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 787) was not primarily concerned with religious art but with the presence of God in the heart, in others and in creation. For icons encourage us to seek the extraordinary in the ordinary, to be filled with the same wonder of the Genesis account, when: “God saw everything that He made and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1.30-31). The Greek word for “goodness” is *kalos*, which implies — both etymologically and symbolically — a sense of “calling.” Icons are invitations to rise beyond trivial concerns and menial reductions. We must ask ourselves: Do we see beauty in

others and in our world?

The truth is that we refuse to behold God's Word in the oceans of our planet, in the trees of our continents, and in the animals of our earth. In so doing, we deny our own nature, which demands that we stoop low enough to hear God's Word in creation. We fail to perceive created nature as the extended Body of Christ. Eastern Christian theologians always emphasized the cosmic proportions of divine incarnation. For them, the entire world is a prologue to St. John's Gospel. And when the Church overlooks the broader, cosmic dimensions of God's Word, it neglects its mission to implore God for the transformation of the whole polluted cosmos. On Easter Sunday, Orthodox Christians chant:

Now everything is filled with divine light: heaven and earth, and all things beneath the earth. So let all creation rejoice.

The principal reason for our visit to the United States this month was our hosting of an environmental symposium along the Mississippi River, focusing on its impact on New Orleans; this journey was also a personal pilgrimage after our original visit to New Orleans soon after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The symposium was the eighth in a series of international, inter-faith and interdisciplinary conferences, which gather scientists and theologians, politicians and journalists, in an effort to raise awareness on regional ecological issues that have a global impact on our world. After all, we are convinced that recalling our minuteness in God's wide and wonderful creation only underlines our central role in God's plan for the salvation of the whole world.

Conclusion:

Opening up to the heart; opening up to the other; and opening up to creation. Our age demands no less than openness from all of us. We hear it stated often that our world is in crisis. Yet, never before in history have human beings had the opportunity to bring so many positive changes to so many people simply through encounter and dialogue. The interaction of human beings and ethnic groups is today direct and immediate as a result of technological advances in the mass media and means of travel. While it may be true that this is a time of crisis, it must equally be underlined that there has also never been greater tolerance for respective traditions, religious preferences and cultural peculiarities.

The human heart, the other person, and the natural creation each

comprise profound icons of the living God. May you always remain open to the heart, to others, and to creation. This is the only way to discern the presence of God in our world.